



IMAGE OF WOMEN IN WOODBLOCK PRINTS AND PAINTINGS BY KITAGAWA UTAMARO

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ABSTRACT

The image of women in the paintings of Kitagawa Utamaro and other Japanese artists, although derived from realistic observations, is not an exact copy of the world. It is the inner vitality in the work that has created a world of its own, attracting the attention of people who enjoy the paintings through the neatness and conciseness of the lines; the light, strong, and condensed colors, which have been able to express the emotions of the artist and the beauty in the paintings. In particular, Kitagawa Utamaro's paintings of women bring a new feel to the genre; reveal mood, nuance and drama through the simplicity of lines and close-up scenes.

KEYWORDS: Woodblock prints, Japan, women, Kitagawa Utamaro.

Women for thousands of generations have played a very important role in social life as well as in the arts. The woman is the existence of perfect beauty throughout time, a symbol of infinity, mystery, and inability to fully grasp, as well as a symbol of the preservation of material cultural values. Therefore, they are one of the chosen characters and the main subject of Japanese woodblock prints, an art form that is so precise and skillfully combined. Women have become a part of history. They create sunshine for the world and create sunshine for poetry. They become an endless source of inspiration for poetry and painting. In every artistic aspect, they are expressed in a beautiful and shining way. The physical beauty of the woman who embodies nature is also frequently drawn, depicted in typical images. In particular, the image of women in Kitagawa Utamaro's paintings is built with strong national characteristic, humanity and clearly marked by the times.

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) is an artist who composed many genres with themes of nature, insects, human life... and is especially famous for drawing women. The beautiful women in his paintings are considered to be the epitome of greatness and sensuality. He also succeeded in capturing the subtle aspects of the personality and mood of women of all backgrounds and ages. His works describe all aspects of a woman's life in all social status, capturing the vibrancy of prostitutes, ordinary women and the bourgeoisie in indoor cozy scenes: women with makeup, women with children or groups of women sewing or cooking. His distinctive language expressed by soft and elegant lines, elongated faces and bodies, warm and soft colors, together with light yellow or golden background, makes his works one-of-a-kind.

The series of paintings *Mussel Seekers* of Kitagawa Utamaro, depicting ordinary women at work, is one of the most talked-about paintings, although the genre associated with his name is portraits and shunga paintings. With these woodblock prints, Utamaro is considered a pioneer in the art of nude painting when portraying ordinary women in daily life. This collection includes three pictures depicting a woman's work in searching for mussels at sea. Each painting includes two characters successfully shown in the art of nude painting with soft and discreet nude images. The first painting shows two girls starting work by observing the animals swimming in the water; one girl uses her arm to show the other the swimming fish, the other girl uses her feet to play with the fish in the water. These two girls are both half naked, revealing their upper body with full breasts. The waves of the sea form many series of curves that join each other and spread that curve all the way to their skirts as if they were bobbing on the waves. The other two paintings also include two characters. The second painting depicts a mother taking advantage of breastfeeding while looking for mussels and the third painting shows the results of the girls' labor with a large basket full of mussels next to them. In the second painting, the artist deliberately chooses the right time for the mother to breastfeed her baby as an excuse to focus on the brightest part of the picture, which is her breast overflowing with milk. In the third painting, it creates an image of a girl almost completely naked next to a girl still dressed. Each painting shows the beauty of Japanese girls at work. Viewers do not see hard work, anxiety in their faces but the joy of these women. The series of paintings *Mussel Seekers* creates a feeling of joy, lightness and serenity when the artist uses gentle colors in general, light and bright colors for the background in specific and sometimes emphasizes a little strong color on the costumes of the women. The loose hair, flowing along the body, deeply creates their tenderness. The ripples of the water, along with the rhythm of the curves on the body, the curves of the clothes and the smooth hair give the series of paintings *Mussel Seekers* a feeling of sweetness, lightness and freshness to viewers.



Mussel Seekers, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 -1806)

Contrary to the working spirit of the girls in the series of paintings *Mussel Seekers*, what is shown in the painting *Pouring rain* shows the hard work of women in daily life. Kitagawa Utamaro reflects the anxious side of Japanese women's lives by showing that they are at work when they encounter a rain and quickly run to shelter from the rain under some big trees. It can be seen that this rainy scene is also an excuse for the artist Kitagawa Utamaro to depict the beauty of Japanese nature. Pouring rain brings an unexpected beauty to the space and is shown by the artist with diagonal strokes and diagonal lines covering the picture. These lines are not repeated, the same, boring because at every corner they are blocked by human bodies. Sometimes, they are even intertwined with the straight lines on the women's umbrellas to create a rhythmic coordination. The image of the woman is shown quite fully with the scene where they are running in the rain, they hold their children under the umbrella and the scene where they just fold the umbrella, and hide under the tree to avoid the wind and rain. The color tones used by the artist in the paintings are mainly gray and black, creating a scene that looks like the sky is about to fall. Hidden in this painting are a few corners that shine in orange and yellow, as if showing a sudden rain despite it was quite sunny before that. In that overcast sky, the women's yellow and red costumes seem to show their strength, they cannot be subdued by the harshness of nature.



Pouring rain, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 - 1806)

The time when Utamaro painted *Portrait of Nani Waya Okita* was when Tokyo was filled with Kabuki theaters and prostitution. Utamaro is a commercial

painter. At that time, he painted a lot of woodblock prints for whorehouses, mainly prostitutes to introduce to guests. His erotic paintings were strongly condemned by the public. At the end of the 18th century, the Japanese government banned the circulation of vulgar pictures. Utamaro turned to close-up portraits of women. Portrait of Nani Waya Okita painting was completed at this time. The painting was so successful that it attracted many guests to Nani Waya tea room. This was the opening painting for his series of close-up portraits. He portrayed the character being at work, doing her daily job of pouring tea to invite guests when they visited the tea room. His form in this painting was quite simple compared to previous sunga paintings. The character he chose was in the inclined direction $\frac{3}{4}$, a view that allowed viewers to fully admire the face of the beauty. Utamaro uses very small strokes, skillfully creating curves that accentuate the graceful figure of Nani Waya Okita. Utamaro's focus emphasizes the voluptuous sensibility of the collar with the two lapels of the neck tightening at the deep slit between the two breasts of the beauty. The girl shown by Utamaro wears a summer robe with a tiny flower pattern, and the hairstyle and outfit are not too picky and special. In terms of color, Utamaro makes subtle use of a half-tone gray and blue. The black and white colors run through all shades of objects on the outfit. Hairpins are gray, plum, sepia and fawn, as if everything is going in a fading dream. The painting gives viewers a feeling of lightness and relaxation as if they were living in calm and quiet days. Viewers are not obsessed with the vibrancy of the world in the houses for prostitutes. That's probably also the reason why people flocked to Nani Waya tea room after seeing the paintings. The painting Portrait of Nani Waya Okita promises viewers a peaceful, sweet space that is welcoming their presence.



Portrait of Nani Waya Okita, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 -1806)

The painting *Omendo Dance* is part of the series *Geisha girls in the festival of Yoshiwara Niwaka inn*. Taking place on the full moon of August every year, the Niwaka festival is perhaps the most magnificent, splendid and decorated festival among many festivals held in this recreation and entertainment paradise. On the days of the inn festival for Yoshiwara prostitutes, the beauties wear the most brilliant and splendid costumes. In the dazzling colors of the elaborate dance costumes, comedy plays are performed by the girls every day. Both men and geisha girls perform in a parade passing by the main road and roads along the center of the Yoshiwara inn. They stop in front of each teahouse along these roads.

The painting *Omendo Dance* shows two geishas preparing their costumes for this dance. Different from the simplicity of the painting *Portrait of Nani Waya Okita* above, the painting *Omendo Dance* is meticulously invested in showing the makeup, hair art as well as the costumes of the girls. Utamaro chose the situation where one girl is wearing shoes and the other is editing her outfit. The two ladies are approached from opposite directions, one from the front and the other from the back giving viewers a full picture of their carnival attire. Each outfit is represented by layers of multicolored fabrics, decorated with densely stacked patterns. Covering the top of the outfit are glittering beads and necklaces. That string of beads runs long, combined with the tassels at the end of the shirt, creating the softness and charming of the costume in the shimmering beauty of the two geisha.

Contrary to the dress on the body, the portraits of these two girls are shown in the simplicity of black, white, and light yellow colors. Her lips formed a tiny triangle, as if whispering loudly. The black color of the hair occupies the dominant part. The complex part is not shown in the color but in the way the hair on the head of the beauty is coordinated with many waves. The direction of the hair bands is intertwined. On the hair, the artist just adds a few thin light yellow hair ties and presses a little white bow.

The combination of the dress complexity and the portrait simplicity creates the perfect element in the painting *Omendo Dance*. Large arrays are alternated with small and medium ones. Tiny tints of tinsel form a long chain like a waterfall, creating a vibrant effect that gives the painting a special impression and makes the painting *Omendo Dance* distinct from the static effect mainly seen in other Japanese woodblock prints. The way the girls look back to let viewers see them as if they were just talking to viewers creates indescribable emotions, stirring up those who enjoy the painting and want to immerse themselves in the exciting activities that the girls are preparing to involve.



Omendo Dance, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 -1806)

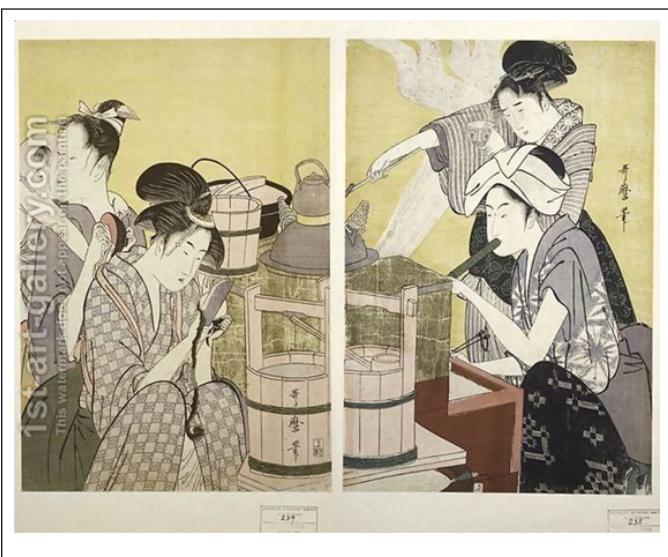
Along with countless Utamaro's shunga paintings depicting playful and licentious activities, erotic scenes of prostitutes, *Dew on a Daisy* is an interesting painting with a unique approach and expression on the sexual theme that Utamaro chose. Viewers may find it hilarious at the humor and wit of this situation. The painting depicts a girl wearing a kimono punching a hole in the paper wall and peeking into the love scene in the room. The painting is beautifully named *Dew on a Daisy* representing that time in the morning. In fact, it's just an excuse for the artist to approach the portrait of a beautiful woman from the back. This is one of the views chosen by Utamaro in describing the beauty of a woman from the back, nape and in the $\frac{3}{4}$ direction. Similar selections can be found in some of his other paintings such as: *Prostitute looking in the mirror*; *Young girl with makeup*... However, unlike other paintings of the same type, there is often a mirror in front of the girl, in which the image of her face is reflected, helping the viewer to observe the entire beauty of the subject. In *Dew on a Daisy*, viewers can only see the back of the beauty without seeing the face of her portrait to the fullest. That is the way to create mystery, curiosity and arise many questions in the viewers' mind: Who is she? How beautiful is she?... And the answer can be partly seen through her white skin, beautiful neck shape, and part of her slim face... all of these features are depicted in small number, revealed behind a black kimono collar.



Dew on a Daisy, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 -1806)

This is also the direction of observation that Utamaro deliberately chose to describe specifically the hair of geisha girls - the accomplishment of one of the most elaborate activities in the makeup process. In this period, the topic of woman's hair was meticulously invested in hair braiding, brooches and jewels attached to her head. The hair of the girl in the painting *Dew on a Daisy* is a highlight. It is formed into an arc with dense curves of each hair, hair array. These curves are combined with continuous, repetitive curves on Kimono costumes to create a flexible, gentle and feminine look. They are further supported by the straight and horizontal lines, the thickness of the stronger strokes in the wooden and bamboo slats on the wall. The painting is elaborately performed by artist Utamaro to create a song, a dance of lines.

Throughout the history of Japan, white skin and black hair have always been the top standards of a beautiful woman. Japanese women are very concerned about appearance. They do not only do make-up, make adorable hairstyles when walking and greeting guests, they also pay attention to their appearance at work. In the painting *Beauty by the Fire*, Utamaro also depicts very beautiful women in traditional costumes, preparing for a meal. In Japan, meal cooking is also a work of art. Japanese always pay attention to every detail in life as an inherent characteristic, a cultural feature of the country of the rising sun. In this painting, each girl is very dedicated to their own work. All the sleeves of the kimono are lifted up to reveal white skin in contrast to the bold colors of the clothes and hair. The atmosphere of the kitchen is full of wood smoke. Wooden boxes are prepared to store food. All details and pieces of space adorn the beauty of the girls with more vivid colors.



Beauty by the Fire, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 -1806)

Utamaro is a very successful exploiter of the beauty of women. In addition to the beauty he delicately describes through portrait paintings, the subject of a working woman also exudes a sexy beauty, expressing the image of a woman not only beautifying her appearance but also taking care of her family with cozy meals. The diversity of topics in the exploitation of women's beauty further confirms Utamaro's talent in the field of Woman paintings.

Kitagawa Utamaro painted *Snow in Fukagawa* painting in 2m high and 3.4m wide. It is said to be completed around 1801-1804. The painting depicts prostitutes gathering around a coal stove and watching the snow at a traditional Japanese restaurant. The picture gives viewers a feeling of joy with a lively scene, a continuous rhythm created by the wooden railings running horizontally and around the restaurant. The rhythm is also created by a variety of postures of standing, sitting, kneeling... and especially all women in the painting turning their heads in one direction, one view point. The characters are divided into groups in many locations in the restaurant with different activities. However, they all have one thing in common: colorful costumes. The girls' kimono costumes have created a vibrant picture and a joyful feeling to the viewers. The white snowflakes perched on the tree branches are an important highlight, gradually attracting the eyes and direction of the girls, making everyone focus on one place even though the composition of the picture is widely spread.



Snow in Fukagawa, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 -1806)

Utamaro's paintings of women in Japanese woodcarving art are like a priceless treasure of mankind. Thereby, we can recognize the development processes of Japanese woodblock prints as well as the artistic achievements that generations of artists as well as Utamaro have researched over the years in a not simple way, containing many ambitions for the eternal beauty in life. In Utamaro's paintings of women, we also encounter small corners of Japanese life. Each fate, each part of life is uniquely expressed through Utamaro's approach, imprinting historical images of Japanese women in different status through each stage of the country's development. Each painting shows every angle of Japanese women's life and at the same time affirms Utamaro's talent through the artistic language he uses and expresses in each work.

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